George Reeves

George Reeves (January 5, 1914 – June 16, 1959) was an American actor. He is best known for his role as Superman in the 1950s television program *Adventures of Superman*.[1][2]

His death at age 45 from a gunshot remains a polarizing topic; the official finding was suicide, but some believe that he was murdered or the victim of an accidental shooting.[1][2][3][4][5][6]

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Early life

Reeves was born **George Keefer Brewer** on January 5, 1914, in Woolstock, Iowa, the son of Donald Carl Brewer and Helen Lescher.[7][8][9] Reeves was born five months into their marriage[10] and the couple separated soon after Reeves's birth. At this time, Reeves and his mother moved from Iowa to her home of Galesburg, Illinois.[11]

Later, Reeves's mother,[12] who was of German descent, moved to California to stay with her sister. There she met and married Frank Joseph Bessolo while Reeves's father married Helen Schultz in 1925. Reeves reportedly never saw his father again. In 1927, Frank Bessolo adopted George as his own son, and the boy took on his stepfather's last name, becoming **George Bessolo**.[13] The Bessolo marriage lasted 15 years,[14] ending in divorce, with the couple separating while Reeves was away visiting relatives. When he returned, his mother told him his stepfather had committed suicide.

According to biographer Jim Beaver, Reeves did not know for several years that Bessolo was still alive. Reeves began acting and singing in high school and continued performing on stage as a student at Pasadena Junior College[15]

Acting career

George Reeves

Reeves in *The Sainted Sisters* (1948)

Born	George Keefer Brewer January 5, 1914 Woolstock, Iowa, U.S.
Died	June 16, 1959 (aged 45) Benedict Canyon, Los Angeles, California, U.S.
Cause of death	Gunshot
Resting place	Mountain View Cemetery Pasadena Mausoleum, Sunrise Corridor Altadena, California, U.S. 34.1840°N 118.1497°W
Nationality	American
Other names	George Bessolo
Education	Polytechnic School (1929), Pasadena,

	California
Alma mater	Pasadena Junior College
Occupation	Actor
Years active	1933–1959
Known for	Portraying Superman in *Adventures of Superman*
Height	6 ft 2 in (188 cm)
Spouse(s)	Ellanora Needles (m. 1940; div. 1950)

While studying acting at the Pasadena Playhouse, Reeves met his future wife, Ellanora Needles. They married on September 22, 1940, in San Gabriel, California, at the Church of Our Savior They had no children and divorced 10 years later

Reeves's film career began in 1939 when he was cast as Stuart Tarleton (incorrectly listed in the film's credits as Brent Tarleton), one of Scarlett O'Hara's suitors in *Gone with the Wind*. It was a minor role, but he and Fred Crane were in the film's opening scene. (Reeves and Crane both dyed their hair red to portray the Tarleton twins.) Reeves was contracted to Warner Brothers soon after being cast. Warner changed his professional name to George Reeves.[13] His *Gone with the Wind* screen credit reflects the change. Between the start of *Gone With the Wind* production and its release 12 months later, several films on his Warner contract were made and released, making *Gone With the Wind* his first film role, but his fifth film release.

He starred in a number of two-reel short subjects and appeared in several B-pictures, including two with Ronald Reagan and three with James Cagney (*Torrid Zone*, *The Fighting 69th*, and *The Strawberry Blonde*). Warner loaned him to producer Alexander Korda to co-star with Merle Oberon in *Lydia*, a box-office failure. Released from his Warner contract, he signed a contract at Twentieth Century-Fox, but was released after only a handful of films, one of which was the Charlie Chan movie *Dead Men Tell*. He freelanced, appearing in five Hopalong Cassidy westerns before director Mark Sandrich cast Reeves as Lieutenant John Summers opposite Claudette Colbert in *So Proudly We Hail!* (1942), a war drama for Paramount Pictures.

Reeves was drafted into the U.S. Army in early 1943.[16] He was assigned to the U.S. Army Air Forces and performed in the USAAF's Broadway show *Winged Victory*. The long Broadway run was followed by a national tour and a movie version. Reeves was then transferred to the Army Air Forces' First Motion Picture Unit, where he made training films.

Discharged at the war's end, Reeves returned to Hollywood. However, many studios were slowing down their production schedules, and some production units had shut down completely. He appeared in a pair of outdoor thrillers with Ralph Byrd and in a serial produced by Sam Katzman, *The Adventures of Sir Galahad*. Reeves fit the rugged requirements of the roles and, with his retentive memory for dialogue, he did well under rushed production conditions. He was able to play against type and starred as a villainous gold hunter in a Johnny Weissmuller Jungle Jim film. Separated from his wife (their divorce became final in 1950), Reeves moved to New York City in 1949. He performed on live television anthology programs, as well as on radio, and then returned to Hollywood in 1951 for a role in a Fritz Lang film, *Rancho Notorious*.[17]

In 1953, Reeves played a minor character, Sergeant Maylon Stark, in *From Here To Eternity*. The film won the Academy Award for Best Picture, and gave Reeves the distinction of appearing in two "Best Picture" films.

Superman

In June 1951, Reeves was offered the role of Superman in a new television series[18] titled *Adventures of Superman*. He was initially reluctant to take the role because, like many actors of his time, he considered television unimportant and believed few would see his work. The half-hour films were shot on tight schedules; at least two shows were made every six days. According to commentaries on the *Adventures of Superman* DVD sets, multiple scripts would be filmed simultaneously to take advantage of the standing sets so that, for example, all the "Perry White's office" scenes for three or four episodes would be shot the same day and the various "apartment" scenes would be done consecutively

Reeves's career as Superman had begun with *Superman and the Mole Men*, a film intended both as a B-picture and as the pilot for the TV series. Immediately after completing it, Reeves and the crew began production of the first season's episodes, all shot over 13 weeks in the summer of 1951. The series went on the air the following year, and Reeves was amazed at becoming a national celebrity In 1952, the struggling ABC Network purchased the show for national broadcast, which gave him greater visibility

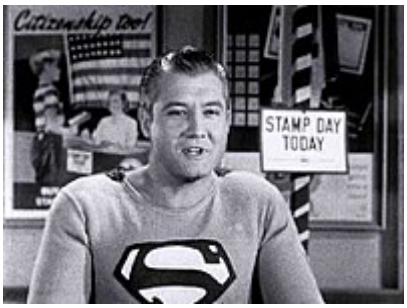
The Superman cast members had restrictive contracts which prevented them from taking other work that might interfere with the series. Except for the second season, the Superman schedule was brief (13 shows shot two per week, a total of seven weeks out of a year), but all had a "30-day clause", which meant that the producers could demand their exclusive services for a new season on four weeks' notice. This prevented long-term work on major films with long schedules, stage plays which might lead to a lengthy run, or any other series work.[19]

Reeves, however, earned additional income from personal appearances. He had affection for his young fans, and took his role model status seriously. He avoided cigarettes where children could see him and eventually quit smoking. He kept his private life discreet. Nevertheless, he had a romantic relationship with a married ex-showgirl eight years his senior, Toni Mannix, wife of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer general manager Eddie Mannix.

In the documentary *Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman*, Jack Larson described how when he first met Reeves he told him that he enjoyed his performance in *So Proudly We Hail!* According to Larson, Reeves said that if Mark Sandrich had not died, he would not be there in "this monkey suit". Larson said it was the only time he heard Reeves say anything negative about bein Superman.

Between the first and second seasons of *Superman*, Reeves got sporadic acting assignments in one-shot TV anthology programs and in two feature films, *Forever Female* (1953) and Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia* (1953), but by the time the series was airing nationwide, Reeves found himself so associated with Superman and Clark Kent that it was difficult for him to find other roles.

Reeves worked tirelessly with Toni Mannix to raise money to fight myasthenia gravis. He served as national chairman for the Myasthenia Gravis Foundation in 1955. During the second season, Reeves appeared in a short film for the Treasury Department entitled *Stamp Day for Superman*, in which he caught the villains and told children why they should invest in government savings stamps.



Screen capture of Reeves as Superman in the U.S. government film *Stamp Day for Superman*

After two seasons, Reeves was dissatisfied with his salary and the show's one-dimensional role. He was 40 years old and wished to quit and move on with his career. The producers looked elsewhere for a new star,[20] allegedly contacting Kirk Alyn, the actor who had first portrayed Superman in the original movie serials and who had initially refused to play the role on television.

Reeves established his own production company and conceived a TV adventure series called *Port of Entry* which would be shot on location in Hawaii and Mexico, writing the pilot script himself. However, *Superman* producers offered him a salary increase and he returned to the series.[21] He was reportedly making $5,000 (about $50,000 in 2018 dollars) per week, but only while the show was in production (about eight weeks each year).[19] As for *Port of Entry*, Reeves was never able to gain financing for the project, and the show was never made.

In 1957, the producers considered a theatrical film, *Superman and the Secret Planet*. A script was commissioned from David Chantler, who had written many of the TV scripts. In 1959, however, negotiations began for a renewal of the series, with 26 episodes scheduled to go into production. (John Hamilton, who had played Perry White, died in 1958, so the former film-serial Perry White Pierre Watkin was to replace him.)

By mid 1959, contracts were signed, costumes refitted, and new teleplay writers assigned. Noel Neill was quoted as saying that the cast of *Superman* was ready to do a new series of the still-popular show.[22]

Attempting to showcase his versatility, Reeves sang on the Tony Bennett show in August 1956.[23] He appeared as Superman on *I Love Lucy* (Episode #165, "Lucy and Superman") in 1957. Character actor Ben Welden had acted with Reeves in the Warner Bros. days and frequently guest-starred on *Superman*. He said, "After the *I Love Lucy* show, Superman was no longer a challenge to him.... I know he enjoyed the role, but he used to say, 'Here I am, wasting my life.'"[24] His good friend Bill Walsh, a producer at Disney Studios, gave Reeves a prominent role in *Westward Ho the Wagons!* (1956), in which Reeves wore a beard and mustache. It was to be his final feature film appearance.

Reeves, Noel Neill, Natividad Vacío, Gene LeBell, and a trio of musicians toured with a public appearance show from 1957 onward. The first half of the show was a *Superman* sketch in which Reeves and Neill performed with LeBell as a villain called "Mr. Kryptonite" who captured Lois Lane. Kent then rushed offstage to return as Superman, who came to the rescue and fought with the bad guy. The second half of the show was Reeves out of costume and as himself, singing and accompanying himself on the guitar. Vacio and Neill accompanied him in duets.[25]

Reeves and Toni Mannix split in 1958, and Reeves announced his engagement to society playgirl Leonore Lemmon. Reeves was apparently scheduled to marry Lemmon on June 19 and then spend their honeymoon in Tijuana. He complained to friends, columnists, and his mother of his financial problems. The planned revival of *Superman* was apparently a small lifeline. Reeves had also hoped to direct a low-budget science-fiction film written by a friend from his Pasadena Playhouse days, and he had discussed the project with his first Lois Lane, Phyllis Coates, the previous year.[26] However, Reeves and his partner failed to find financing, and the film was never made. Another Superman stage show was scheduled for July[27] with a planned stage tour of Australia. Reeves had options for making a living, but those options apparently all involved playing Superman again—a role that he was not eager to reprise at age 45.

Jack Larson and Noel Neill both remembered Reeves as a noble Southern gentleman (even though he was from Iowa) with a sign on his dressing room door that said "Honest George, the people's friend".[28] Reeves had been made a "Kentucky Colonel" during a publicity trip in the South, and the sign on his dressing room door was replaced with a new one that read "Honest George, also known as Col. Reeves", created by the show's prop department. A photo of a smiling Reeves and the sign appears in Gary Grossman's book about the show.

Death

Reeves died of a gunshot wound to the head in the upstairs bedroom of his home in Benedict Canyon between 1:30 and 2:00 a.m. on June 16, 1959, according to the Los Angeles Police Department report. The police arrived within the hour. Present in the house at the time of the incident were Leonore Lemmon (Reeves's fiancée), William Bliss, writer Robert Condon, and Carol Van Ronkel, who lived a few blocks away with her husband, screenwriter Rip Van Ronkel.

According to these witnesses, Lemmon and Reeves had been dining and drinking earlier in the evening in the company of writer Condon, who was ghostwriting an autobiography of prizefighter Archie Moore. Reeves and Lemmon had an argument at the restaurant in front of Condon, and the three of them returned home. However, Lemmon stated in interviews with Reeves's biographer Jim Beaver that she and Reeves had not accompanied friends to the restaurant but rather to wrestling matches. Contemporaneous news items indicate that Reeves's friend Gene LeBell was wrestling that night—yet LeBell's own recollections are that he did not see Reeves after a workout session earlier in the day.

Sometime near midnight, after Reeves had gone to bed, an impromptu party began when Bliss and Carol Van Ronkel arrived at the Reeves home. Reeves angrily came downstairs and complained about the noise. After blowing off steam, he stayed with the guests for a while, had a drink, and then returned upstairs again in a bad mood. The guests later heard a single gunshot from upstairs. Bliss ran upstairs into Reeves's bedroom and found him lying across the bed dead, his naked body facing upward and his feet on the floor. It is believed that this corroborated Reeves's sitting position on the edge of the bed when he allegedly shot himself, after which his body fell back on the bed and the .30 caliber (7.65×21mm) Luger pistol fell between his feet.

Statements made by the witnesses to the police and to the press essentially agree. Neither Leonore Lemmon nor other guests who were at the scene made any apology for their delay in calling the police after hearing the fatal gunshot that killed Reeves; the shock of the death, the lateness of the hour, and their state of intoxication were given as reasons for the delay. Police said that all of the witnesses present were extremely inebriated and that coherent stories were very difficult to obtain from them.

In contemporary news articles, Lemmon attributed Reeves's alleged suicide to depression caused by his "failed career" and inability to find more work. The report made by the Los Angeles Police states, "[Reeves was]... depressed because he couldn't get the sort of parts he wanted." Newspapers and wire-service reports quoted LAPD Sergeant V.A. Peterson as saying: "Miss Lemmon blurted, 'He's probably going to go shoot himself.' A noise was heard upstairs. She continued, 'He's opening a drawer to get the gun.' A shot was heard. 'See there—I told you so!'"[29]

The official story given by Lemmon to the police placed her in the living room with party guests at the time of the shooting, but hearsay statements from Reeves's friend and colleague from *Gone With The Wind* Fred Crane put Leonore Lemmon either inside or in direct proximity to Reeves's bedroom.[30] According to Crane (who was not present), Bill Bliss had told Millicent Trent after the shot rang out, while Bliss was having a drink, that Leonore Lemmon came downstairs and said, "Tell them I was down here, tell them I was down here!"[31]

A number of questionable physical findings were reported by investigators and others: No fingerprints were recovered from the gun. No gunpowder residue was found on Reeves's hands. (Some sources contend that it may not have been looked for, as gunshot residue testing was not routinely performed in 1959.[32]) The bullet that killed Reeves was recovered from the bedroom ceiling, and the spent shell casing was found under his body. Two additional bullets were discovered embedded in the bedroom floor. All three bullets had been fired from the weapon found at Reeves's feet, though all witnesses agreed they heard only one gunshot, and there was no sign of forced entry or other physical evidence that a second person was in the room.[33] Despite the unanswered questions, Reeves's death was officially ruled a suicide, based on witness statements, physical evidence at the scene, and the autopsy report.[34]

Reeves's mother thought the ruling premature and peremptory, and retained attorney Jerry Giesler to petition for a reinvestigation of the case as a possible homicide. The findings of a second autopsy, conducted at Giesler's request, were the same as the first, except for a series of bruises of unknown origin about the head and body. A month later, having uncovered no evidence contradicting the official finding, Giesler announced that he was satisfied that the gunshot wound had been self-inflicted, and withdrew.[35][33]

Reeves is interred at Mountain View Cemetery and Mausoleum in Altadena, California. In 1960, Reeves was awarded a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame on Hollywood Boulevard for his contributions to the TV industry.[36] In 1985, he was posthumously named one of the honorees by DC Comics in the company's 50th anniversary publication *Fifty Who Made DC Great*.

Controversy

Actors Alan Ladd and Gig Young were reportedly skeptical of the official determination. Reeves's friend Rory Calhoun told a reporter, "No one in Hollywood believed the suicide story." In their book *Hollywood Kryptonite*, Sam Kashner and Nancy Schoenberger make a case for the involvement of Toni Mannix, the wife of MGM vice president and fixer Eddie Mannix, with whom Reeves had been having an affair. Others suggested that Eddie Mannix—rumored to have mafia ties—ordered Reeves killed.[37]

The 2006 film *Hollywoodland*, starring Ben Affleck as Reeves and Adrien Brody as a fictional investigator loosely based on actual detective Milo Speriglio, dramatizes the investigation of Reeves's death. The film suggests three possible scenarios: accidental shooting by Lemmon, murder by an unnamed hitman under orders from Eddie Mannix, and suicide.

Ben Affleck as George Reeves in *Hollywoodland*

Toni Mannix suffered from Alzheimer's disease for years and died in 1983. In 1999, Los Angeles publicist Edward Lozzi said that Toni Mannix had confessed to a Catholic priest in Lozzi's presence that she was responsible for having Reeves killed. (This was following the resurrection of the Reeves case by TV shows *Unsolved Mysteries* and *Mysteries and Scandals*.) Lozzi made the statement on TV tabloid shows, including *Extra*, *Inside Edition*, and *Court TV*. In the wake of *Hollywoodland*'s publicity in 2006, Lozzi repeated his story to the tabloid *The Globe* and to the *LA Times*, where the statement was disputed by Jack Larson. Larson stated that facts which he knew from his close friendship with Toni Mannix precluded Lozzi's story from being true. According to Lozzi, he lived with and then visited the elderly Mannix from 1979 to 1982 an on at least a half-dozen occasions he called a priest when Mrs. Mannix feared death and wanted to confess her sins. Mannix suffered from Alzheimer's disease and senile dementia, but Lozzi says that her confession was made during a period of lucidity in Mannix's home before she was moved from her house to a hospital. Mannix lived in a hospital suite for the last several years of her life, having donated a large portion of her estate to the hospital in exchange for perpetual care. Lozzi also told of Tuesday night prayer sessions that Toni Mannix conducted with him and others at an altar shrine to Reeves that she had built in her home. Lozzi stated, "During these prayer sessions she prayed loudly and trance-like to Reeves and God, and without confessing yet, asked them for forgiveness." Lozzi's statement, however, is unsupported by independent evidence.

Filmography

Film

Year	Title	Role	Notes
1939	*Espionage Agent*	Warrington's secretary	Uncredited
1939	*On Dress Parade*	Southern soldier in trench	Uncredited
1939	*Gone with the Wind*	Stuart Tarleton – Scarlett's beau	Credited erroneously onscreen as playing Brent Tarleton (see above)
1940	*The Fighting 69th*	Jack O'Keefe	Uncredited
1940	*Father Is a Prince*	Gary Lee	
1940	*Virginia City*	Major Drewery's telegrapher	Uncredited
1940	*Tear Gas Squad*	Joe McCabe	
1940	*Pony Express Days*	William F. 'Buffalo Bill' Cody	20 min. short
1940	*Calling All Husbands*	Dan Williams	
1940	*Always a Bride*	Mike Stevens	
1940	*'Til We Meet Again*	Jimmy Coburn	
1940	*Torrid Zone*	Sancho, Rosario's Henchman	
1940	*Gambling on the High Seas*	Newspaper Reporter	Not for the Daily Planet
1940	*Knute Rockne, All American*	Distraught Player	Alternative title: *A Modern Hero*, Uncredited
1941	*The Strawberry Blonde*	Harold	
1941	*Blood and Sand*	Captain Pierre Lauren	
1941	*Lydia*	Bob Willard	Alternative title: *Illusions*
1941	*Man at Large*	Bob Grayson	
1941	*Dead Men Tell*	Bill Lydig	
1942	*Border Patrol*	Don Enrique Perez	
1942	*Blue, White and Perfect*	Juan Arturo O'Hara	
1942	*Sex Hygiene*	Pool player #1	U.S. Army documentary
1943	*Bar 20*	Lin Bradley	
1943	*So Proudly We Hail!*	Lt. John Summers	
1943	*The Kansan*	Jesse James	Uncredited
1944	*Winged Victory*	Lt. Thompson	Credited as Sgt. George Reeves
1945	*Airborne Lifeboat*	Pilot	
1947	*Champagne for Two*	Jerry Malone	Alt. title: *Musical Parade: Champagne for Two*
1947	*Variety Girl*	Himself	Uncredited
1948	*Jungle Goddess*	Mike Patton	
1948	*Thunder in the Pines*	Jeff Collins	Released in sepiatone
1948	*The Sainted Sisters*	Sam Stoakes	
1948	*Jungle Jim*	Bruce Edwards	
1949	*The Great Lover*	Williams	
1949	*Samson and Delilah*	Wounded messenger	

1949	*Adventures of Sir Galahad*	Sir Galahad	15-chapter serial
1950	*The Good Humor Man*	Stuart Nagle	
1951	*Superman and the Mole Men*	Superman / Clark Kent	Alt. title: *Superman and the Strange People*
1952	*Rancho Notorious*	Wilson	
1953	*The Blue Gardenia*	Police Capt. Sam Haynes	
1953	*From Here to Eternity*	Sgt. Maylon Stark	Uncredited
1954	*Stamp Day for Superman*	Superman / Clark Kent	
1956	*Westward Ho the Wagons!*	James Stephen	

Television

Year	Title	Role	Episode(s)
1949	*The Clock*		2 episodes
1949	*Actors Studio*		"The Midway"
1949–1950	*The Silver Theatre*	Frank Telford	2 episodes
1949–1950	*Suspense*	Various roles	4 episodes
1949–1952	*Kraft Television Theatre*	Various roles	7 episodes
1950	*Believe It or Not*		"Journey Through the Darkness"
1950	*The Trap*		"Sentence of Death"
1950	*Starlight Theatre*		2 episodes
1950	*The Web*		2 episodes
1950	*Hands of Murder*		"Blood Money"
1950	*The Adventures of Ellery Queen*		"The Star of India"
1950–1951	*Lights Out*		2 episodes
1951–1958	*Adventures of Superman*	Superman / Clark Kent	104 episodes
1952	*Fireside Theater*	John Carter	"Hurry Hurry"
1952	*Ford Theatre*	James Lindsey – Father	"Heart of Gold"
1955	*Funny Boners*	Superman	March 15, 1955
1957	*I Love Lucy*	Superman	"Lucy and Superman"

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